



An Interview with Author Kelly Barnhill

Kelly Barnhill is the author of four novels, most recently *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, winner of the 2017 John Newbery Medal. She is also the winner of the World Fantasy Award and has been a finalist for the Minnesota Book Award, a Nebula Award, and the PEN/USA Literary Awards. *The Ogress and the Orphans* is a new instant fantasy classic about the power of generosity and love – and how a community suffers when they disappear.

***The Ogress and the Orphans* and *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* have some common threads: both are middle grade fantasies with themes of community, familial love, and of course, magic. In what ways are the books different?**

It has never occurred to me to think about a book in relation to others I have written – each of my books, for me, is simplicity itself. If I had to say something, though, I think the main difference is in the directionality of the two pieces – from the external to the internal versus the internal to the external.

The Girl Who Drank the Moon is primarily concerned with the effects of manipulation and cynical re-rendering of actual events – how the story, the most fundamental aspect of the human mind, can be used to connect, enlighten, and build bridges to others. Still, it can also be twisted and exploited and used to build walls instead. A story can tell the truth, and a story can also lie. Unfortunately, recent times have reminded us of this again and again.



Photo credit: © Bruce Silcox

continued...

In *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, the agent of change is in the power structure imposing its will on the individual – the direction of the piece is from the external to the internal. *The Ogress and the Orphans* does something very different – it looks at the power of individual actions to create good, which build upon themselves to make more good in the larger community. Sometimes people feel that it doesn't matter what we do or how we choose, or whether our actions are kind or just or generous or fair, because our actions never make a significant difference in the grand scheme of things. Nonsense! Of course they do. Acts of kindness, generosity, fairness, justice, and openheartedness all matter. They all make a difference. We just can't always see it.

Not only does each action matter, but the collective weight of multiple actions also matters even more. In *The Ogress and the Orphans*, one single person attempts to make a difference in a small way, bit by bit by bit. And it seems at first that it doesn't make a difference. But it does.

Where did the idea for *The Ogress and the Orphans* come from?

During the last presidential administration, there was a moment when it felt like the news was uniformly terrible – cruelty had become normalized, nastiness was a new form of currency, and all our progress towards justice and equality seemed to be going backward. I often did what I needed to heal my soul and regenerate a bit – I started writing fairy tales. This is typically a purely creative practice for me. I write fairy tales longhand in the quietness of my notebook and never intend to show them to anyone. These are stories that are just for me.

But then I started a story about a gift-giving ogress and a wicked mayor and a household full of loving and clever orphans, and very quickly, this story didn't seem to behave like the others. It stood apart. It had eyes and skin and breath and soul. It was separate from me. I still didn't think it was a novel – I honestly thought it was a picture book – but I sent it to my agent just to get his thoughts. And my agent sent it to my editor, who said, "Oh yes, of course, this wants to be a novel. Carry on." And so I did.

Paper cranes appear in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, and the crows are memorable characters in *The Ogress and the Orphans*. What inspired you to use birds as a motif in both books?

I just love birds. If I could start my life over, I probably would stick with biology in college and become an ornithologist. When I was a kid, my dad kept bird feeders and identification books by the windows, and when we went on family camping trips, the highlights were always what birds we could see, hear, and identify. As I grew older, I became particularly interested in crows' habits, abilities, and particularities. I'm fascinated by their long memories and complex family structures and their ability to make and use multipurpose tools. They are well mannered and precise and are frankly full of themselves. What's not to love?

What do you enjoy most about writing fantasy novels?

Everything. The world is a strange place, but we live inside it and have become accustomed to its strangeness and oblivious to its oddities. Sometimes the only way to look at the thing is to step away and shake things around. Emily Dickinson tells us to "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." To me, that's what a poem does, but it's also what a fantasy novel does. It tells the truth, but slanted. Later in that same poem, she reminds us, "The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind." I think this is the purpose of fantasy – and has been ever since Beowulf and Arthur and the Leviathan and the doofuses on Mount Olympus and Gilgamesh and his unending rage. The world is complex, mysterious, and sometimes sinister – a thing of wonder, beauty, and marvelous strangeness. Sometimes we must tell the truth outlandishly to see the oddness that we've normalized and the everyday things that we have transmuted into oddities. Fantasy allows us to ask big questions, take nothing for granted, and uncover truths that we often leave hidden.

continued...

The Ogress believes “the more you give, the more you have.” What do you hope readers take away from her philosophy?

For me, it all comes down to the Prayer of St. Francis, something I had to learn in grade school. It is more important for us to love others than seek love for ourselves. It is more important to give than to receive. It is more important to forgive than to be forgiven. It is more important to understand others than to try to be understood. And further – the only antidote to despair is hope. This is all very hard to do. I myself am terrible at it. Despair is way easier than hope! Everyone knows that! And it is tough to love people who espouse hate. It feels like an impossible task.

So much of this book hinges on the idea of the beloved community – what happens to a place when everyone loses their sense of civic responsibility and togetherness, and what happens when neighbors forget what it means to be neighbors and what they owe their neighbors. And it’s easy to feel as though a broken community is irreparable. But it’s not. Kindness matters; generosity matters; empathy matters; goodness matters. Indeed, each action springs from a place of positivity or fairness or egalitarianism or giving as mass and gravity. The collective impact of multiple people doing good builds upon itself. That’s what I want my readers to take away – that their actions have meaning.

What does the library represent in the book?

It’s a funny thing – I finished this book over a year ago, and I had no idea we would land at this moment when cynical individuals are puffing themselves up with their talk of banning books for ludicrous reasons and even burning those books. Just writing that down hurt my heart – imagine what it must do to a person’s soul when they have the audacity to suggest such a thing. It is monstrous to ban a book, burn a book, and attack a library. A library is more than a place, after all. A library is an idea. A library represents the indelible human right of learning, connection, and storytelling. A community’s library is a testament to its past and a promise to its future; these books are for everyone; these stories are for everyone; these ideas are for everyone; these conversations are for everyone. No one is left out. Everyone belongs.

Interview courtesy of Algonquin Young Readers

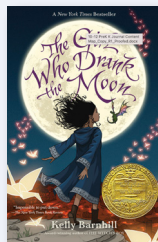


The Ogress and the Orphans

Kelly Barnhill • Algonquin Young Readers
2022 • IL 5-8

When a child goes missing from the Orphan House, at the Mayor’s suggestion, all eyes turn to the Ogress. How will the Orphans tell the story of Ogress’s goodness to people who refuse to listen? And how can they make their deluded neighbors see the real villain in their midst?

1903DV2 \$18.07 HRD



The Girl Who Drank the Moon

Kelly Barnhill • Algonquin Young Readers
2016 • IL 5-8

An epic fantasy about a young girl raised by a witch, a swamp monster, and a Perfectly Tiny Dragon, who must unlock the powerful magic buried deep inside her.

11563CB6 \$16.31 HRD